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ASSESSING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BILITERACY IN TWO WAY BILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses a factor in biliteracy development that is not usually singled out as a part of literacy instruction. It is, however, every bit as important as methodology, reading materials, or instructional paradigms. The neglected factor in planning for bilingual teaching of reading and writing is the mindset of children regarding the development of two languages, specifically Spanish and English in bilingual programs.

In general, the important role of children's attitudes in learning how to read and write has been relatively ignored in research and practice. Even though there is general agreement that attitude plays a significant, if not the central role, in achieving literacy, assessment of reading and writing progress has generally focused on comprehension and skills rather than attitude (McKenna &;Kear, 1990). The lack of attention to assessing and using information about attitudes is also the case in the study of biliteracy development. It isn't that nothing is known about attitude and its relationship to learning a second language. Substantial research has been done on attitudes of second language learners, particularly Spanish speakers learning English (See Gardner &;Lambert, 1972; Edelsky &;Hudelson, 1980; Oller, 1979; Ramirez, 1985; Skutnabb-Kangas &;Cummins, 1988; Zirkel &;Greene, 1976), but this knowledge base has not been systematically used in instructional planning for biliteracy development. Most research regarding attitude and second language learning does not specifically address the relationship between attitude and reading and writing in two languages. Still, the literature could be helpful in forming instruction for biliteracy development of second language learners. For them, attitudinal and motivational factors are particularly critical since learning a new language is not just a matter of acquiring new information. Learning a new language necessitates a personal entry into another cultural group (Dulay, Burt, &;Krashen, 1982; Delgado-Gaitan &;Trueba, 1992; Wong-Fillmore, 1989; Ramirez, 1985), forcing students to adopt new cultural norms of social interaction as well as a new linguistic code.

Willingness to learn a new language is influenced by attitudes about native languages, about target second language groups, and about relationships with speakers of both languages. For example, language, being one of the more visible manifestations of any group's culture, has often been the lightning rod that attracts the prejudice and discrimination directed at minority ethnic or racial groups. Negative perceptions held by members of the majority society are internalized by children, and minority students often feel ashamed of their language and angry toward the larger society (Ramirez, 1985; Skutnabb-Kangas &;Cummins, 1988).

In order for language minority children to learn and use English productively then, they must come to grips with feelings about their minority status in American society and with how they are perceived by the English speaking majority.

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES IN BILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

Because bilingual programs were developed to serve non-English speaking children, almost all students in bilingual classrooms are Spanish speakers or, in a few cases, Chinese, Vietnamese, or Hmong. There is a tremendous variety in the type and quality of bilingual programs, but in all well-designed programs the children's native language is used for initial reading and writing instruction as research and experience tell us that is the most effective way of developing literacy skills. Further, instruction through the native language is the most effective and efficient way of empowering students to learn all subjects, to become skilled in cognitive and linguistic processes, and to eventually acquire a second language (Cummins, 1988; Krashen &;Biber, 1988). Since bilingual programs have traditionally only served non-English speaking students, discussions of biliterate development have been limited to minority language students, primarily Spanish speakers. Thus, biliteracy development in bilingual classrooms has most often meant acquiring English while attempting to develop Spanish skills to some degree.

However, discourse about biliteracy development should begin to encompass speakers of the majority language as well-for several reasons. Research tells us that in order to facilitate second language learning, children should have natural, real opportunities to interact with native speakers of the target language (Cummins, 1988; Krashen &;Biber, 1988; Terrel &;Krashen, 1983). Therefore, in order to produce realistic, natural opportunities for biliterate development in public schools, bilingual classrooms should include native speakers of both languages. Allowing children from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to acquire each others' languages should help promote better understanding and more productive relationships between minority and majority language groups.

Two-Way bilingual programs have attempted to provide the opportunity for both language minority and majority children to develop biliteracy by including English speakers as part of their student populations. The goal of most Two-Way programs is to bring Spanish speakers and English speakers to full bilingualism. In planning for instruction of Spanish and English speaking children who are part of Two-Way programs then, the same issues about students' attitudes toward language must be addressed. English speaking students in bilingual settings must also deal with attitudes they have acquired regarding the minority group language and their relative power status.

In short, students' feelings about their native language and second languages can't be separated from their feelings about self as learners and members of society. Attitudes toward language are an integral part of learning a second language and therefore should be an integral part of planning and teaching for second language learning. Students must be understood in terms of attitude as well as cognitive and linguistic processes in order to maximize biliteracy development in any and all bilingual classrooms.

ATTITUDES IN BILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

All bilingual programs, Two-Way and others, purport to promote the native language of their students. And so, bilingual teachers, secure in their belief that the use of the native language benefits students, are sometimes surprised when they encounter Spanish dominant children who are ambivalent or who openly resist using Spanish in school, preferring to use English even when they are limited in their ability to do so. Teachers feel frustrated when they have worked to become proficient in another language and have fulfilled

requirements for bilingual certification, only to find that Spanish dominant students sometimes shy away from using Spanish and often resent being placed in Spanish reading groups. This behavior on the part of students has been documented (Commins, 1989; Nieto, 1992; Ramirez, 1985) and noticed by many experienced bilingual classroom teachers. Given the xenophobia surrounding languages other than English in this country, we can readily understand why students might be ambivalent about developing English or Spanish. At the same time though, students' attitudes can still surprise us because attitudes are something we often overlook in planning for literacy instruction. We assume that students understand the need to develop their native language in the same way we understand it. We assume that they perceive biliterate development on the same terms as we do. If our assumptions are inaccurate, yet our understanding of students' attitudes is important to facilitating learning, we need to find out what students' attitudes are and use what we find in planning for instruction.

CHILDREN SPEAK OUT

What do children in Two-Way, or any bilingual classrooms for that matter, understand about biliteracy development, and what are their attitudes toward each language involved in bilingual classroom settings? What do children think each language is for, and how do they feel about developing their native language and learning a new one? Since most Two-Way bilingual classrooms use Spanish and English, the questions can be even more specific to these two languages. How do Spanish speaking children feel about becoming literate in Spanish and learning English as a second language? What do English speakers feel about learning the minority language? Others may want biliteracy for them, but what do the children want?

Results from a study of emerging literacy in kindergartners attending a Two-Way bilingual school gave some insight to answers about children's attitudes and perceptions. Unexpected findings about children's perceptions illustrated the importance of attending to children's attitudes and perceptions of languages used in bilingual classrooms. Interviews I conducted with 10 kindergartners entering a brand new Two-Way bilingual program yielded some surprising findings. The initial study was not intended to study attitude but was actually aimed at documenting emerging writing skills of the 10 case study kindergartners. Data were collected from daily journal writing, observations, and personal interviews over a six month period. Insights which surfaced about attitudes and perceptions of languages, however, proved to be more interesting and in some ways more urgent. The kindergarten teacher realized that there was a need to address children's perceptions and attitudes before carrying on with developing literacy skills in both languages. In my case, years of teaching in elementary bilingual classrooms had taught me not to assume that Spanish dominant children would be overjoyed at the opportunity to read in Spanish. Still, findings from the interviews surprised me. I had always believed that the transitional orientation of most bilingual programs caused students to rush into English and abandon using their native tongue. This Two-Way program on the other hand, was committed to biliterate development and emphasized development of both languages. I expected, then, that the children in the Two-Way program would have a different attitude toward the development of both languages. However, the descriptions children gave about their reading and writing efforts revealed that even in this setting where both languages were equally valued, Spanish and English speakers alike perceived English to be the more legitimate school language.

Initial contact with the children was made in the language I believed to be their dominant language, information which was supplied by the classroom teacher. Thus, Spanish speakers were approached by a bilingual, Hispanic interviewer. Even so, Spanish speakers were anxious to use English. Interviews with the children were tape recorded in December 1988 and again in May 1989. Reading behaviors were documented, and writing samples were analyzed. Children described their own writing, telling what they

wrote about and how they felt about it. They answered questions about the language they were writing in, and the language/s used in their descriptions were also noted.

Although the purpose of the study was to document the acquisition of writing skills, important findings revealed the perceptions students had of the relative status and function of Spanish and English. For example, English was used by all students to describe their writing even when children were Spanish dominant and limited in their ability to use English. All native Spanish speakers used a mixture of Spanish and English words and phrases to describe what they had written, using English whenever they were able. Two Spanish dominant students answered questions stated in Spanish with English responses whenever possible and indicated that their journals were written in English even though their narratives describing them were mostly in Spanish. They described the writing as English, but they did not have enough proficiency in English to actually use it in telling what they wrote about. One bilingual student did not initially use Spanish in the interviews although he was clearly more comfortable in Spanish. Only one native English speaker volunteered Spanish in her description and did use a string of Spanish words to tell about her writing. She invented Spanish words to tell about her writing. She invented Spanish sounding words and used all the Spanish words she knew in an effort to speak Spanish. The other two English speakers did not volunteer any attempts at Spanish. The first interviews were done while students were still in the early stages of literacy development as they were just beginning to read and write. Their inclination to use English did not change over the course of the year even after they had been immersed in literacy activities in both languages.

End-of-the-year descriptions of students who were further along (using inventive spelling, organizing sentences, identifying purposes for writing) in the development of literacy described Spanish and English as being basically the same in function (i.e., communication)-they "just look different." These students articulated a clear concept of what language is for,-"to ask questions and to tell things." They identified and pointed to letters and words as they read and incorporated letters and words into scribbles and pictures in writing. Many of the written words and letters of Spanish dominant students were identifiable as Spanish. In spite of seeing the two languages as basically the same, however, they showed a preference for English and perceived it to be the language they were supposed to write in eventually.

Children's apparent preference for English was undoubtedly due to many factors inside and outside of the classroom. The important point here was that even though school personnel and parents had committed themselves to biliterate development of students and had gone through great pains to establish their Two Way bilingual school, they were temporarily confounded by the children's, even Spanish dominant children's, orientation toward English. The perception of English as the preferred school language was something no one had expected. Children regarded Spanish as acceptable to use but seemed to view it as a vehicle they leaned on as they worked to become proficient in English.

Although the number of students interviewed in this study was small (three Spanish dominant children, four bilingual, and three English dominant children), the findings about attitude and perceptions caused school personnel to examine their assumptions about their children's readiness to develop both languages. They realized that they did not know what students in their school really thought about learning and developing Spanish. If these were the views of the youngest children just entering a school that promoted biliteracy, what did children in the upper grades who had been in traditional bilingual or English-only schools think? Parents enrolled their children with the intention of having them learn two languages, but what did the children themselves understand about that eventual goal?

PROMOTING POSITIVE ATTITUDES

The kindergarten teachers subsequently developed strategies that consciously attended to upgrading students' perceptions of Spanish as a language for literacy development. For example, they separated languages for instruction by alternating days of instruction. A pair of teachers, one English and one Spanish speaking, alternated their groups of children and only taught in their designated language, thereby ensuring that Spanish had equal time and status and was used for all academic and literacy learning tasks. The school recruited more Spanish dominant students so that the classrooms would be balanced in numbers of each language group. The first year of the Two-Way implementation (the year of the study) the majority of the students in the classroom were English dominant, even the majority of those who were Hispanic. The school lobbied for more Spanish language materials, including children's literature in Spanish and content area materials. Most importantly though, the awareness and sensitivity of the kindergarten teacher to students' perceptions and attitudes increased, and knowledge of these attitudes was incorporated into their daily lesson planning. Planning and instruction were enhanced by making sure that activities addressed this affective objective as well as linguistic skills and knowledge.

What makes students feel the way they do?

Language minority students' ambivalence about their native language can be explained in part by others' views of them and in part by bilingual programs themselves. First, students receive messages about their worth and value and subsequently about their language from a variety of sources-home and family, community, schools, and the larger society. Parents play a dominant role in attitude development toward language (Torres, 1988). Society at large also strongly influences children's attitudes and perceptions. The distinction between marked and unmarked languages in any given society may explain the pull toward English since studies suggest that both minority and majority children display a knowledge of which language is the normal, expected language of the institution (Edelsky &;Hudelson, 1980). Children then act on this knowledge of the preferred language regardless of the designated dual language situation in bilingual classrooms.

Further, when society devalues a student's language or does not value biliteracy, students cannot be blamed for being ambivalent about embracing two languages. Because the United States historically has promoted monolingualism in order to break immigrant ties to native lands, language usage is strongly associated with political power, and bilingualism is suspect and devalued. Proficiency in English, or even willingness to speak English and abandon other native languages, is strongly identified with being American (Anderson &;Boyer, 1978; Castellanos, 1985; Crawford, 1989; Hakuta, 1986; Nieto, 1992; Scarcella, 1990). American history has swung back and forth between attacking languages other than English and ignoring them. Today we are in an attacking mode which spawns movements like official English and withdraws support from bilingual education. Increased immigration (especially from Spanish speaking countries) also contributes to fears and apprehension among mainstream English speakers that English will lose its dominant position.

A third explanation for reluctance to use non-English native languages is the orientation of most bilingual programs themselves. Children in bilingual programs are pulled toward English because the majority of the programs have a transitional focus and are evaluated on how quickly they can transfer students into English only classroom settings. Indeed, the use of Spanish in bilingual classrooms is often only justified or permitted because it is the most efficient and effective tool for learning English rather than something that should be developed in its own right. This orientation results in having students who enter school with the potential for full biliteracy leaving school without literacy skills in their native language.

Only a few school districts have bilingual programs that are committed to achieving full biliteracy. Some

Developmental, Maintenance, and Two-Way programs do have full biliteracy as a goal and have successfully achieved biliteracy for some of their students (Collier, 1989). However, as suggested by results of the interviews with kindergartners reported here, even in those programs that do emphasize native language development and seek to develop truly bilingual students, the balance may be tipped in favor of greater development in English. The buy-in to biliteracy isn't automatic on the part of students, and educators who propose to develop biliteracy would do well to examine attitude as a factor that can inhibit or promote biliteracy.

The reasons for our history and our current state of xenophobia are beyond the scope of this paper but are well documented in the sources cited earlier . The important point here for teachers is that children internalize the attitudes of society and develop self-concepts and concepts of others based on the messages they receive. Bilingual educators then, have the task of countering attitudes ingrained by the larger society. There is more to developing biliteracy than effective instructional strategies and books in both languages. The success of biliterate development also depends on students' attitudes and their understandings of biliteracy and what it means for them.

To counter negative attitudes about languages, bilingual schools will need to enlist the cooperation and support of parents as they still have a great influence on how their children perceive their native language and second languages. Even parents who choose to place their children in Two-Way bilingual schools to learn a second language will need to actively support their children in developing positive attitudes toward biliteracy.

In promoting positive attitudes toward biliteracy, the first step is to better understand the attitudes students already have. To do this, we must put the goal of biliteracy in perspective and know what we are up against when we expect students to become biliterate. Societal values which work against the development of non-English languages are powerful forces causing children and bilingual programs alike to promote English and back away from other native languages. Counteracting these forces will require proactive plans for assessing attitudes and then utilizing information from assessments.

ASSESSING STUDENTS' ATTITUDES AND UNDERSTANDINGS

The first step in understanding students' viewpoints about biliteracy is to formally or informally assess those views. In discussing children's viewpoints, I include two constructs: (a) attitude as a motivating force, and (b) understanding of language and its function. The role that attitude plays in determining human behavior makes it critical that teachers be aware of students' attitudes and use their awareness and knowledge of those attitudes in planning for instruction. Mueller describes the importance of attitude in human interactions this way: "Attitudes constitute an immensely important component in the human psyche. They strongly influence all of our decisions: the friends we pick, the jobs we take, the movies we see, the foods we eat, the spouses we marry, the clothes we buy, and the houses we live in. We choose the things we choose, to a large extent, because we like them" (Mueller, 1986, p. 7). Attitudes are difficult to define and even more difficult to assess because they cannot be observed or measured directly (Henerson et al., 1987). Their existence must be inferred from their consequences. While social scientists do not completely agree about the definition of attitude, there is substantial agreement that affect for or against is a critical component of the attitude concept (Mueller, 1986). There is an evaluative aspect to attitude so that the definition could be restated as a like or dislike of a psychological object. Sociolinguists have used the term "language attitude" to define this same evaluative reaction or feeling toward language.

The task of measuring attitude is not a simple one, and attempts to measure change in attitude are perhaps

the most difficult of all evaluation tasks (Henerson, Morris, &;Fitz-Gibbon, 1987). Still, it is important that classroom teachers be aware of and understand their children's attitudes as they create environments that promote bilitercy. Without making light of a very complex assessment task, I believe it is possible for classroom teachers to make some assessments about attitudes and perceptions, to monitor these attributes in their students, and to use information from assessments to enhance instruction.

Since most formal methods of assessing attitudes are probably not feasible for teachers in classrooms, informal ways of assessing children's attitudes are most useful. Research about children learning a second language informs us on two major points. First, positive attitudes result in more second language learning, and second, the nature of the target language group and where the learner fits within that group are critical to learning a second language (Hakuta, 1986). Keeping this and the idea of affect for or against as a critical component of attitude in mind, personal interviews with students about their home language and about their feelings toward using each classroom language can give teachers unique information about what is important to their students. Talking with children about their emerging reading and writing processes also gives insight to students' ideas about language in general and Spanish and English in particular for those most important academic processes. Part of a student's reading record should include information on choice of language for specific purposes, acquisition and loss patterns, and affect for or against each language. Further, in order to get an idea of how students perceive Spanish and/or English in math, science, social studies, and other academic areas, teachers can observe children's language behaviors during instruction in these subjects as well as talking about them. Only by talking to students about languages they use or don't use and by closely observing their language usage can we understand children's attitudes.

As long as students think of Spanish as primarily for home and social activities, they will not develop it for academic purposes. If they are to become biliterate they need to begin to choose Spanish as a language for the more academic tasks of literacy and content area learning as well as for social situations. By proactively planning activities that use Spanish in an academic context we can counteract the negative views learned from society about Spanish not being an acceptable language for school. Perhaps we can monitor our own linguistic behavior more closely as well, taking care not to unconsciously limit our use of Spanish to affective situations rather than academic ones.

Given the opportunity to use either or both languages in their lives, children choose the languages they use because they like them, that is, their affect toward them is positive. Therefore, part of our job in developing biliteracy becomes one of helping students learn to like their native language and their second language.

The second part of what we need to assess, children's understandings about the function of language, includes what students actually know about each language, how it is used at home, in their communities, in school, and in the larger society. This includes their knowledge of the political, social, and power relationships among speakers of the various language groups. For example, do children know why their parents may encourage them "to speak English as much as they can?" Parents accept the fact that English is important to learn and encourage their children to learn English (Cohen, 1975; Torres, 1988). That does not mean, however, that they think Spanish is not valuable. At least one study of attitudes of parents with children in bilingual programs suggested that the use of Spanish as a medium of instruction in schools, the growing importance of bilingualism as a criterion for employment, and the recognition of the international value of Spanish may be expanding the traditional perspective of Spanish as only a language of social intimacy in American schools (Torres, 1988).

Other questions which might be addressed in assessment as well as instruction about language are: Do children know how the teacher came to speak two languages or maybe one language better than the other?

Do they understand the historical context for English being the dominant language in this country, or do they just assume that is the natural order of things? Do they know that Spanish and English are major languages in the rest of the world and know where they are used? Knowledge and new information mediate attitudes and alter perceptions of reality.

CONCLUSION

Without adding to what teachers already have to do in the classroom, recording information from informal interviews and observations could yield useful information about an important aspect in planning for biliterate development. Students' attitudes and understandings of dual language development are important variables that have been generally overlooked in development of programs designed to foster biliteracy, and they should be added to information about student skills and knowledge of reading and writing. Understanding the cognitive and linguistic processes involved in learning languages is important, but we may be missing an important part of planning for biliteracy if we do not make a point of assessing attitudes. Without conscious attention to this, we are operating on assumptions about students' motivation to learn two languages. We may be projecting our attitudes and values onto students and expecting they are in tune with us. Further, we cannot assume that our particular students in our particular classrooms think and understand the way other children in other bilingual classrooms think. Across the country children are in very different circumstances and have very different experiences.

Bilingual educators have been so pressed to develop effective programs, programs that work, that we have focused on "how to" and assumed that children have clarified their understanding of what we are up to. We need to make assessment of and sensitivity to linguistic attitudes a more formal part of reading and writing instruction. With accurate information on how our children perceive their development in two languages we can counteract negative messages students receive from other areas of their lives and use the positive attitudes they have toward their respective languages to develop truly biliterate individuals.

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